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Red Flags and Pandemics: Moments of Hesitation Determine Outcome

Maximilian Bonnici

Abstract

It is often claimed that if the world had been promptly forewarned about COVID-19 in China, it would have acted sooner and prevented a catastrophe. Yet, we are witnessing another Chinese initiative, the Belt and Road policy, which threatens to drown global regions in debt, and many governments are doing nothing to stop it. Hesitation in front of red flags determines humanity's destination. I use the Azores as an example of being on the receiving end of Chinese expansionism, of how it all started with a group of Chinese tourists fluent in Portuguese, and how this innocent looking factor opened the door for more serious political maneuvering by the Communist Party of China (CPC).

I examine closely the writings of the CPC's Haoguang Liang and Yaojun Zhang and how they sugarcoat the true intent and perilous outcomes of the Belt and Road initiative as China becomes more assertive in its economic and military strategies. I also draw lessons from Francisco Cantú's work, *The Line Becomes a River*.

Introduction

Writers of scientific papers about the onslaught of COVID-19 often assume that the pandemic infiltrated remote spots around the world due to the nebulous nature of a lab in China (Chaturvedi, Ramalingam & Singh, 2020; Latham & Wilson, 2020). Nobody saw it coming. If the world had received an early alert, governments would have acted earlier and decisively. This line of reasoning assumes that the global community would have envisioned the impending catastrophe and mustered enough motivation to act decisively in stopping the virus in its tracks. I question this line of reasoning.

To demonstrate how lethargic government bureaucracies may be in the face of danger, I focus on a parallel case that originates as a group of language enthusiasts from China and ends up in remote spots like the Azores islands and other economic stricken areas. Although the case should be of grave international concern, countries continue to turn a blind eye until one day it may be too late. I am referring to the Chinese Belt and Road initiative which threatens

to plunge entire communities in ruinous debt. Like poor Cantú, it may take time before a deluded nation fully wakes up to the reality of the situation.

For the Azores, it started a few years ago when a group of Chinese nationals showed up speaking fluent Portuguese on the Portuguese islands. This was an unusual sight for the locals who took pride that their culture and language had attracted attention from faraway China. More important visitors from China followed. Kates (2017) chronicles how after the U.S. Air Force scaled down its presence at Terceira, Chinese President Xi Jinping, sensing a geopolitical vacuum, visited the Azores in 2014. Two years later, it was Chinese Premier Li Keqiang's turn to visit. The Chinese used their foot-in-the-door technique of sending in the Portuguese-speaking Chinese nationals as evidence of their appreciation for the local culture. But this is no different than Cantú's Border Patrol seeking recognition for its rescue operations while pushing migrants towards death. "To demand recognition... is much like firefighters asking to be thanked for putting out a blaze started by their own chief" (Cantú, 2018, p. 260). On its part, Lisbon has played Brussels, China, and the United States for maximum gain over the past decade (Youkee, 2020). However, the Belt and Road initiative could be a ruinous import, decisive in dictating the future of the islands. In the end, it is Cantú's José who pay the price for the dehumanizing power of governments.

Belt and Road

To better understand what the Belt and Road policy holds in store for the islands' economy and culture, I scrutinized the work of two of its major exponents, Haoguang Liang and Yaojun Zhang (2018, 2019), of the Communist Party of China (CPC). Their 2019 eBook version allowed me to engage in a further in-depth content analysis such as checking how many times they used certain specific words throughout the book. Citing by location, instead of page number, is the standard format for eBook references. The propaganda spirit in which Liang and Zhang pen their books may best be summarized by their paragraph:

The... achievements of socialism with Chinese characteristics have... expanded the path for... countries to progress toward modernization... We believe that under the leadership of the Belt and Road initiative... countries can steadily achieve modernization in a manner suited to their unique national conditions (p. 133).

Therein lies the authors' prescription for the Azores: follow the Chinese way and the Azores will readily achieve its desired success.

Not once do Liang and Zhang mention the words "communism" or "capitalism." They downplay traditional political philosophies. Instead, they are

interested in Chinese nationalism and its influence in international trade initiatives. In their arguments, the word “socialism” is always encased in the phrase “Socialism with Chinese characteristics” with the emphasis being on Chinese rather than socialism. The word “socialism” is almost redundant as the emphasis is on “Chinese wisdom and the Chinese approach to solving the world’s problems” (p. 129). It is a hallmark of Chinese proponents (e.g., Hu, Liu & Hu, 2017; Huang, 2016) of the Belt and Road initiative to brush aside potential negative fallouts on host countries. The CPC allows no reservations from its scholars in selling the initiative.

Across international boundaries, it is common to inject a villain into the narrative. For Cantú (2018), the villain is the brutality of the system, the militarized border, the callous laws, the private prisons, and the sicario who confesses “I was very violent” (p. 154). For Liang and Zhang, the nemesis is unified in the crosshairs, the West, the wicked West that has held humanity backwards. Economically struggling countries, they tell us, have trusted blindly in Western theories, misguided in the belief that Westernization is the *sine qua non* for modernization. Such countries failed to differentiate themselves from the “Western development model” (Preface p. ii) which, unlike Belt and Road, is a cookie cutter model, a one size fits all. Of special concern to the authors is the West’s domination of the multinational media market which distorts the world’s perception of China.

Western media attacks Chinese media for “excessive propaganda” as lacking the benefits of the “freedom of the press” (p. 52). However, China is not holding back, promoting its culture with vigor on international markets. The authors observe how it has now reached the stage where Cao Wenxuan has been awarded the “Hans Christian Andersen Award” (p. 53). Hans Christian Andersen, a Danish author, is best known in Western culture for his fairy tales. China’s national orchestra “has ascended to the world stage” (p. 53). Times are changing, “breaking the monopoly of the Western value system” (p. 10). Soon, “for the internet, it should become possible for the world to copy the Chinese model” (p. 52). One could not help but think how the authors commit the same mistake they accuse other countries of, by measuring China’s modernization against Westernization.

Just as the line becomes a river and a lifeline for the immigrant’s journey as documented in Cantú’s book, the sea lanes are the lifeline of the Chinese economy. Ninety percent of Chinese trade occurs via shipping across the oceans. The authors are certain that the United States intends to block the sea lanes. Therefore, a multifaceted approach is necessary to counter such menace, and this is how countries and islands around the sea lanes enter the picture. “Peace” is a common word in the eBook, appearing no less than 29 times. “Win-win” is another overused phrase that surfaces 58 times. However, at some point, pragmatism takes over and the authors emphasize the importance of military

naval investments that “look west” ready to unleash nuclear weapons, “ensuring mutual destruction.” So much for peace and win-win. The end justifies the means. The book that originally starts out as a roadmap for the Belt and Road initiative, promising prosperity to the Azores and other hosts, quickly evolves into a coaching manual for the Chinese team, spelling out what should be done with the military, think tanks, soft power communications, and strategies. Countries around the Belt and Road route tend to be bereft of infrastructure projects. The authors advise China to inject funds in these countries in return for lucrative contracts.

Conclusion

Liang and Zhang overlook the fact that economically depressed countries may never be able to pay back for massive infrastructural projects. Instead, they emphasize the need for Chinese banks to be more aggressive in engaging in international loans for countries that solicit Chinese projects. However, the banking realities are more complex than Liang and Zhang make them out to be. They include debt traps, and the impact of the Chinese presence on the host economy and its culture. They acknowledge that the debt crisis is spreading along the Belt and Road route, but this is the only time, in just one sentence, that they acknowledge the word “debt” in the entire book.

As China pursues military and strategic footholds, using debt trap diplomacy to seize assets from debtors, as Sri Lanka discovered when it was too late (Buckley, 2020; Khor, Poonpatpibul, & Suan Yong Foo, 2021), I caution that a country in debt enslaves its young and burdens its people. What started as an innocuous celebration of the Portuguese language in the Azores, just as what started as an inconspicuous lab experiment in Wuhan followed by international travel, could have far-reaching consequences.

In his conclusion, Cantú (2018) offers a solution on how to banish evil schemes from our hearts. He holds himself out as finally finding the courage not to participate in the border system, refusing to partake in its normalization: “When we consider the border, we might think of our home; when we consider those who cross it, we might think of those we hold dear” (p. 267). Do not expect such epiphany from Liang and Zhang. They are Communist party operatives representing an ideology that sent about 100 million citizens to the grave. The folly of the Portuguese addicting themselves to cheap Chinese loans is mirrored in the folly of the Germans dismantling their nuclear energy programs, prostrating themselves to the Communist Russians to take care of their energy needs.

The Chinese Belt and Road initiative’s difference from a Russian incursion is that the Chinese use business loans to colonize future generations while the Russians use military hardware. Cantú (2018, p. 150) cautions that “moral injury is a learned behaviour, learning to accept the things you know are wrong.”

The West knows it is playing with fire, indebting itself to the CPC. In the West, political and financial servitude will increasingly emerge as the delusional outcomes of history. The pain may come from afar, but to quip on Cantú's comment (p. 228), José's pain is not Liang's or Zhang's, it is his family's.

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Author Bio

Maximilian Bonnici fondly remembers the summers he spent with his parents in a couple of Mediterranean islands, visiting friends and relatives. Fishing and boating were the norm. Years have passed since then. This 20-year-old student at West Virginia University realizes that island life may not be as idyllic when financial servitude lurks under the surface.